The groups of Wilmington residents—upper class whites, working class whites, free blacks, and freed slaves—all emerged from the Civil War living and working in Wilmington in a network turned on its ear, a circumstance caused primarily by the freedom granted to former slaves and the promise of equality for them within society. The men, women, and children created a new Wilmington, ready to face the challenges and rewards they hoped would quickly emerge from the ashes of the war. The reality of Wilmington after the war, however, was fraught with conflict between the races, often muted, as African Americans asserted themselves in their new roles, and whites became increasingly fearful of losing not only their status but their control of life in the port.[53] Reconstruction, as a long drawn-out process, did not alleviate the troubles of rebuilding after the war as many hoped but, instead, drew sharper definitions for many underlying problems facing Wilmington and the South.[54]

**Occupied Wilmington**

Wilmington's location and dependency on the commercial import/export trade forced her citizens to face the end of the war and ensuing Reconstruction with a much different attitude than other areas of the state. Furthermore, its prewar pro-Unionist reputation reemerged as a factor in its recovery. Once Federal forces occupied Wilmington, a force of approximately 15,000 soldiers spread out across town. Refugees from outside the city began to stretch its resources to the breaking point as they filed in on a daily basis. The city's downtown businesses were in ruin because of fires set by retreating Confederates and looting by both Union and Confederate factions. The economy was shattered because military authorities prevented merchants from reopening trade, and supplies from inland were cut off, effectively ending the influx of provisions to the city. Therefore, in the months after the initial occupation, the city faced severe shortages of food, fuel and supplies for its citizens, as well as for the many who would come into the city over the next months. [55]
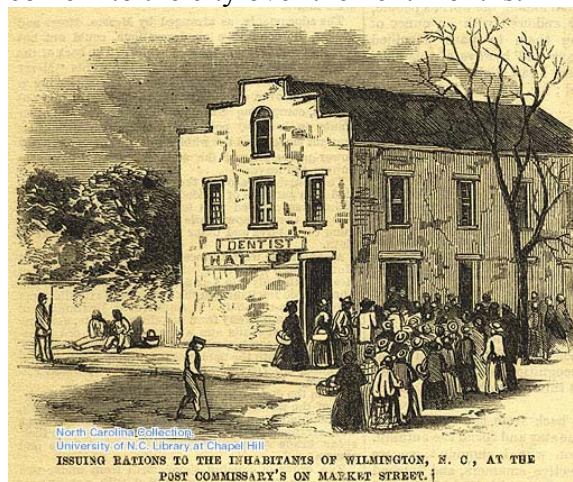


"Issuing rations to the inhabitants of Wilmington N.C." 1865. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper,* April 1, 1865
*Image courtesy of North Carolina Collection, UNC-CH.*

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*Southerners: Black Economic Success in North Carolina, 1865-1915,* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 43-47.
[53] A psychological change took place among freed slaves who sought to re-define themselves as free people. Among Wilmington natives, black and white, this change was subtle and detectable only to themselves since many outsiders visited and could not identify how local whites feared black "insolence" as the attitude change came to be called. Evans *Ballots and Fence Rails,* 78-79.
[54] Some native whites and occupying white soldiers intermingled socially and united to insure that blacks remained submissive, particularly during Presidential Reconstruction. Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails*, 65.

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[55] Historian William McKee Evans has observed that the period from January 15, 1865 until June 20, 1865, was pivotal in the Wilmington area since the region was at the mercy of the Federal military while the President and Congress wrangled over how to handle Reconstruction. Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails,* 249-251; Fonvielle, *Wilmington Campaign*, 444.